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Martinez schools may need to cut \$2.6 million

By Lisa P. White
Contra Costa Times

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MARTINEZ — Even with an infusion this year of parcel tax cash, the Martinez school district may need to cut \$2.6 million from its \$30 million budget, and it cannot count on the city riding to the rescue this time.

"The budget situation is certainly far more bleak than it was last year," Superintendent Rami Muth said this week. "When you look at the fact that the governor's budget is predicated on (federal funds) that I think are uncertain; in May, the cuts could even be greater."

In January, the district received its first payout from a parcel tax that Martinez voters approved in 2008. However, the \$526,000 already has been allocated for textbooks, elementary music and physical education teachers' salaries, a secondary-school librarian and classroom supplies. An unanticipated enrollment increase of about 100 students this year brought in more revenue.

"Your children don't care that the state is in a fiscal crisis. They want the best first-grade year. They deserve it," Muth told a group of about two dozen parents Tuesday, during the first of a series of community meetings on the budget.

School districts are receiving \$252 less per student in state funding this school year, which was billed

as a one-time cut, according to Liz Robbins, the Martinez district's chief business official. However, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposed budget includes a \$201-per-student cut for the 2010-11 school year, which amounts to a \$775,000 loss for Martinez, Robbins said.

Martinez has a \$2.5 million budget deficit this school year, which it is covering by drawing on its \$5.7 million reserve fund. Based on the governor's January budget, the district would have to tap its reserves again this coming school year to cover a gap of slightly more than \$2 million. Salaries and benefits make up about 90 percent of the district's \$30 million budget.

"Deficit spending year over year means you have to implement cuts that are ongoing," Robbins said. "As you continue to deficit spend, you eat up your reserves."

After consulting last year with parents and teachers, the school board cut \$1.6 million by increasing ninth grade class sizes, eliminating department chairs, reducing counseling, dropping K-7 summer school and other measures, including an employee furlough day last month that shaved \$133,000 from the budget.

An 11th-hour \$500,000 loan from the city saved 19 teaching positions and maintained small class sizes in the early grades for this school year.

At Tuesday's meeting, parents offered feedback on several options for cutting costs. They soundly rejected increasing class size in grades K-3 and eliminating high school and middle school sports. They supported shortening the school year, redirecting money from the adult education program to the schools and increasing the parcel tax by as much as \$50.

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Shelley James, who moved to Martinez from Indiana about five years ago, was disheartened by the budget picture.

"I am ready to move back to Indiana because of the school system," said James, who has two children in elementary school. "I feel the situation is very bleak."

Lisa P. White covers Martinez and Pleasant Hill.
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